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ABSTRACT

Although technology is affecting the way organizations conduct business, there still remains a need to pay attention to good business meeting practices. Based on observations of the meeting practices of a business firm, a consultant found several areas in which meetings can be made more productive. The purpose of the meeting should be defined. Meetings for the sake of company ritual should be avoided. They should be convened to gain commitment or exchange information interactively. One-way giving of information can be accomplished better and less expensively with written memos or electronic mail. The meeting should be kept small, preferably five to seven members, but never more than eleven. Participants should be limited to those who really need to be there. In terms of interaction, the meeting should be structured in advance, with a complete agenda for participants that is used judiciously and flexibly. Meetings should be kept under one hour, if at all possible, and should start and end on time. Finally, businesses should explore technology offering computer and group decision support systems that can have a beneficial impact on how and why meetings are conducted. (HTH)

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IMPROVING MEETING PRODUCTIVITY

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ABSTRACT

Modern technology is affecting the way we meet to conduct business. Communication is replacing transportation. However, there is still a great need to pay attention to good meeting practices. Meetings are used best when they secure commitment or when information is exchanged interactively. They should be kept small and short, and involve only those who can contribute effectively.

INTRODUCTION

In their recent book entitled Corporate Cultures, Terrence E. Deal and Allan A. Kennedy (1982) characterize meetings as organizational rituals, performed in the hope that desired effects will be brought about. These rituals are performed largely because managers are unsure about how to perform their duties and have meetings hoping that something positive will happen.

They relate one story in which a colleague of theirs, Tom Peters, one of the authors of In Search of Excellence (Peters & Waterman, 1982), was consulting with a high-tech firm interested in reducing overhead costs. His initial recommendation was to reduce the number of meetings that the firm held. The senior vice president balked at this recommendation, stating that Peters did not understand the culture of the organization. He invited Peters actually to live with him for a week to understand why the organization behaved the way it did. Peters moved in with the executive's family and shadowed him for a week at home and at work.

Peters found that 97 percent of all working hours were spent in meetings which were attended by an average of 35 people drawn from three or four different staff levels. The ostensible purpose of these meetings was to make decisions, but few decisions were actually made because of time pressures and a failure adequately to outline alternatives. The meetings were composed of lengthy and complex slide presentations full of facts and figures. Peters concluded that the meeting ritual, although reflecting the culture of the organization adequately, failed in that it prevented the organization from accomplishing its goals and only added to company overhead.

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This case points to a number of problems with the modern business meeting. This paper will examine the meeting in today's organizational setting and point out ways in which it might be improved. The problems associated with group meetings will be discussed in terms of purpose, size, composition, interaction, length, and decision-making aids.

PURPOSE

The first problem encountered by Peters had to do with the purpose of the meeting. In the organization described, the meeting served primarily a ritualistic purpose, although the stated purpose was to make decisions. There was, in effect, mainly one-way communication with flashy, highly-prepared presentations. These presentations are probably useful, but should be the result of decision-making meetings, and rarely input for one. In my experience in consulting with large organizations, there is a great temptation to conduct regular meetings of this type to "stay in touch" and to "keep people informed." These one-way, information-giving meetings can seldom be justified as either efficient or effective. Written memos would likely do a better job at a lower cost. Thus, an important consideration about a meeting is whether to have one at all.

Meetings in organizations should be reserved for what they do best--exchanging information and opinion and obtaining commitments for action. According to O'Neill (1982), these purposes will be reflected in the following:

1. To review status, identify problems, set priorities, and to allocate resources.

2. To ascertain the cause of the problem.

3. To make a decision, usually from among several alternatives.

4. To generate ideas, possible solutions, or possible courses of action.

5. To produce a plan, a schedule of activities and an allocation of resources.

6. To identify possible hazards, difficulties, or delays.

7. To identify possible opportunities.

In each case, the purpose is to exchange information or gain commitment. However, each of these specific purposes may call for a different pattern of attendance, preparation, length of meeting, and strategy. A manager planning an effective meeting will analyze

carefully the purpose since it so directly affects many other aspects of the meeting.

SIZE

Peters related a second problem with the organization--the size of the meetings. A meeting with 35 members in attendance is no longer a small group. Different procedures must be devised for controlling the flow of interaction. Members are no longer able to see each other and can no longer speak at will without being recognized. My experience in working with groups is that when a group reaches 11 or 12 members, it cannot function in the same way that a group of 7 or 8 members can function. An important part of groupness is lost. Beyond 11 members, it is difficult to maintain a single conversation. Usually several conversations will emerge simultaneously, and the group deteriorates into several smaller groups.

COMPOSITION

Often, the tendency in calling a meeting is to get together anyone and everyone who might just possibly be able to contribute or who might need to be consulted because he or she is peripherally affected by the project. This practice leads to meetings which are too large and in which participation is uneven. Participants are bored, the group is difficult to control by the leader, the meeting will be too long, and extraneous topics are frequently brought up.

An effective leader will consider whether 6 ten-minute one-on-one meetings with individuals would be more effective than bringing them all together for a single meeting. He or she will be conscious of the costs of a meeting. I have seen meetings in academe involving budgetary decisions in which the amount of funds being allocated in the meeting was exceeded by the total cost of the hourly rates of the individuals making the decision. So much for productivity in academia.

INTERACTION

Most of the literature on meetings urges the leader to structure the meeting in advance, providing a complete agenda to participants. There is even a procedure, often called the Standard Agenda or Vigilant Decision-Making (Janis & Mann, 1977), which involves the following steps:

1. Defining and limiting the problem.

2. Analyzing the causes of the problem.

3. Stating the criteria for acceptable solutions.

4. Outlining the available solutions.

5. Gathering of additional data on proposed solutions.

6. Selecting the best solution.

7. Planning the implementation of the chosen solution.

8. Evaluating of the process of making a decision.

Although I believe agenda to be important, I have seen the agenda used prematurely when a group was not ready to begin using that agenda. The group had not had time to reduce primary tensions and was being forced to undertake tasks before adjusting to each other socially. The group rebelled at being tied to the agenda and wasted a great deal of time. Bormann (1969) discovered in his study of meetings of leaderless groups that most groups do not proceed in a rational, orderly, step-by-step fashion. This behavior is particularly the case when the group is investigating the problem or is in what Bormann calls the context of discovery. At this point in a discussion, a group may work in an intuitive, emotional, haphazard way.

Only later when the group is attempting to see how the idea will fly with outside groups and agencies is a rational model like the standard agenda useful or to be expected. This is what Bormann (1969) calls the context of justification. It occurs when a group attempts to systematize and organize its reasons and evidence in support of a solution. At this point in a meeting a group may find structuring techniques helpful. Before this, a technique like brainstorming, which is really structured unstructuredness, will be helpful.

LENGTH

Surveys of business executives reveal that too much time is spent in meetings. Meetings function under a type of Parkinson's Law in which the length of time it takes to reach a decision expands to the amount of time available. Meetings also are affected by Parkinson's Law of Triviality which states that the amount of time taken to reach a decision varies inversely with the importance of that decision.

The Chairperson of my Department has a rule that no meeting she participates in will last longer than one hour. Decisions that formerly were deliberated for several hours now take just minutes, and I don't feel that the quality of those decisions is diminished. The point is that groups can and ought to impose rules on themselves to limit useless discussion. Seldom does a meeting need to exceed an hour in length. If it does, then perhaps several shorter meetings should be considered.

DECISION-MAKING AIDS

I believe that the personal computer and other advances in telecommunication technology will revolutionize the way in which business is conducted in meetings. According to Patrick Portway (1983), a leading authority in video conferencing and President of Applied Business Communications, nearly half of the largest American corporations plan to install advanced teleconferencing systems in the near future. Frost and Sullivan, a New York market research firm, predicts that, by 1992, teleconferencing will be a $1.6 billion business. The expense of teleconferencing, while less expensive than transporting people, will force businesses to evaluate the benefits of meetings and look for ways to accomplish the same results for less money.

Personal computers are already having an impact on the way business meetings are conducted. Word-processing allows last minute changes to be incorporated before the printing of the agenda. Spreadsheets greatly simplify budget making by providing answers to "what if" questions while the meeting is in progress. Project management software allows managers to stay current with progress on implementation of decisions made in groups. Presentations are facilitated by preprogramming visuals which are stored on disk until they need to be called up during a presentation. Alternatively, slides and transparencies can be made from the computer-generated visuals. Bulletin boards and electronic mail eliminate the need for meetings in which the main purpose is to stay "in touch with the troops" or disseminate information in a one-way fashion.

One particularly fascinating emergent technology affecting group meetings is that of group decision support systems (GDSS) (Huber, 1983). These systems, although still in the experimental stage, promise to make sweeping changes in the way groups function. Essentially a GDSS is a local area network of computers or terminals which are tied together. Each member of a group has a terminal through which he or she can enter data or react to questions. These data can be summarized by the computer and fed back anonymously with means, ranges, and standard deviations. This procedure allows for an instant Delphi Technique to be carried out.

Spreadsheets can be used interactively by groups as well as individuals to answer "what if" questions. According to Huber, this capability reduces the frequency with which differences of opinion about assumptions or data lead either to premature adjournments of meetings or to unconvinced participants.

Another intriguing possibility is that of a group's being able to do interactive, real-time word-processing of text materials. Frequently, groups are involved in creating a text. This usually involves meeting, then one of the members writing up the consensus and sharing hard copies with the other members for subsequent editing. This time-consuming process can be shortened and member input improved with on-line text-editing.

CONCLUSION

This paper has taken a look at the modern business meeting and made suggestions for avoiding many of the pitfalls inherent in it. The following suggestions will serve any modern manager well as he or she plans group meetings:

1. Avoid meeting for the sake of ritual. One-way giving of information can be accomplished better and less expensively with written memos or electronic mail. Meetings should do what they do best--to gain commitment or exchange information interactively.

2. Keep the meeting small--preferably 5 to 7 members, but never more than 11.

3. Invite only those individuals who really need to be at the meeting.

4. Try to think of more economical ways to accomplish the same result as having a meeting. Time is money.

5. Realize that there is a time for structure and a time for looseness, a time for rationality and a time for counterrationality, a time to discover and a time to justify.

6. Keep meetings under one hour in length if at all possible.

7. Start and end meetings on time.

8. Investigate the decision-making aids available in the new technologies.

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